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Friday, 25 March 1989
Reflections on Cuba II

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When I made this point at a CPS/NA seminar at Harvard, David Welch and James and Janet Blight found it extremely unsettling, in part because their own recent book on the crisis relies, in its interpretations, heavily on the presumed candor of their interviewees. "Are you saying that our book is worthless, that nothing these people say can be believed?" both Blights asked in great dismay.

Of course, my conclusion that certain of the statements made at the conferences or to the interviewers were untrue or deliberately misleading did not mean that the testimony was worthless, still less the book as a whole. It did mean--as should have been taken for granted from the beginning--that any assertions heard might be misleading, indeed totally false. This would seem to be the right presumption for any journalist, historian, detective or juror, seeking truth amidst controversy.

This applies to any "witness," but especially to a current or former government official, as I.F. Stone has pointed out: "All government officials lie, and nothing they say is to be believed." (I.e., believed with high confidence, without questioning it, without corroborative evidence.)

That principle may not--as it should--be engraved on the walls of the John F. Kennedy School of Government, but it ought not have occasioned so much shock as it did when I cited it. It is not that everything officials say is a lie, or the opposite of the truth (interpreting their statements might be simpler if that were the case). The reality is that anything they say, no matter how plausible and with what convincing fervor they say it, may be a lie, or deliberately misleading.

This is above all true of national security officials, as in this case. For them, lying convincingly is part of their job. Willingness to lie about certain matters and the ability to lie consistently and persuasively is one of the important practical requirements for getting and holding office in the higher or more "sensitive" parts of the national security bureaucracy (or for being involved at all in these regions, including secretaries and assistants).

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This remark by me at the seminar caused particular consternation among the several listeners from the Kennedy School. They took it as intolerably cynical. Indeed, it is not a commonplace observation even within the government. Yet as a proposition or a practical experience, it could only be unfamiliar to someone who had never held a high security clearance. High national security officials--and their assistants and secretaries (like Fawn Hall, now testifying, as I write this, about her shredding of evidence) would quickly recognize an obligation to lie as another side of their access to secrets, a requirement of the operation of a secrecy system.

To keep those "unauthorized" from knowing or guessing at information that is "closely guarded, highly protected"--in particular, information that is classified higher than Top Secret, and information of other sorts that is regarded as comparably "sensitive"--it is not enough to refrain from mentioning it, nor, where a truthful or complete answer to a direct question would reveal the content or existence of such data, is it acceptable to respond: "No comment," "I'm not allowed to answer that," or "That's secret."

Given the context of the question or the prior knowledge of the questioner, such a response might lead to a correct or otherwise unwanted inference by the listener, or at the least could stimulate a search on their part for other witnesses or evidence that could lead them to the hidden knowledge. So answers like that--not directly helpful but not untruthful--are admissible only to protect (for a relatively limited period) low-level, less sensitive secrets.

Where it is important to avoid not only immediate, correct understanding in the mind of the listener but certain kinds of guesses at it or an active effort or search to discover what is being concealed, it is essential that a positive, skillfully misleading or untruthful answer be given to a potentially dangerous question. The untruth might be, "I don't know," or "I'm not aware of that" or "That's never been under consideration, so far as I know," or it may be a more concrete falsehood or distraction.

Those who accept such responsibilities are given to understand that they have not only a license to lie in such circumstances, it is their obligation to lie. They are led to believe that this is a legal obligation, subject to prosecution and imprisonment for violating it; in most cases this happens to be false--they are being lied to in this respect, though those "briefing" them may be ignorant of the falsehood--though with respect to certain narrow classes of secrets it is true.

What is more practically important in controlling their behavior is that their willingness to lie and their skill at deceit in this pursuit is a condition of their continuing "access" to

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sensitive secret information of this sort, which in turn is a condition of their being invited into influential, prestigious meetings and discussions and to being entrusted with certain important assignments and roles. Thus their ability to hold their jobs, and to rise in their careers is hostage, in part, to their willingness and ability successfully to dissimulate and deceive: not just strangers, but in many cases close colleagues who do not happen to be "authorized" to learn certain facts, intentions, missions or expectations.

A diplomat is said to be an official sent abroad to lie for his country. But the same kind of improvisational "acting ability" is called for among many officials who do not go abroad, and as much within high government circles as in dealings with members of Congress, the press or the public.

The dismay exhibited by the Kennedy School analysts when presented with evidence that they had been lied to, and still more at the suggestion that this should not be regarded as highly surprising--in other words, the suggestion that their earlier absence of skepticism had been somewhat naive--reflected, I suspect, several judgments on which their credulity had been based.

First, perhaps, unwarranted confidence that officials--especially Kennedy officials?--did not lie to scholars from the Kennedy School at Harvard as they might to the public. Second, several of the officials in question, such as McNamara and Bundy, had won their special trust both by their political stance and values and by their face-to-face demeanor of candor, and their readiness and even eagerness to participate in the retrospective discussions. Third, the events in question were twenty-five years old: what secrets would need keeping that long?

Actually, they need not have felt quite so chagrined at the evidence that they had been conned: it was not done frivolously or "unnecessarily" and it was not carried off by amateurs. The people who misled them had been practiced in doing this, and drilled in the necessity of doing it, over long careers; and though they were mostly retired now and the events in question were long gone, they felt they carried a license and a duty to lie about these particular matters that would never expire for the rest of their lives.

In the case of covert operations, for example, or of communications intelligence, that is a formal property of the classified access: the information is never automatically declassified with the passage of time, nor ever loses its highly sensitive status. They might be willing to allude to aspects of these that had become public knowledge through Congressional investigations or leaks--though even this would breach strict rules that could lose them clearances they were currently holding and

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jeopardize any prospect of holding them in future--but officials with this background were very unlikely to volunteer any information that could not be referenced to public sources. (There is a striking absence of any such revelation, for example, in McGeorge Bundy's recent voluminous history of the nuclear era, during six years of which he had unparalleled knowledge of secret data and operations).

This is marginally less true, formally, for war plans, but in practice few of these have been subject to authorized release in less than thirty years.

But these are two of the categories which have been significantly concealed over the years--up to the present--in discussions of the Missile Crisis by former officials: the covert operations against Cuba in late 1961 and 1962, Operation Mongoose, and--just recently disclosed in FOIA releases, but still "protected" in the recollections of McNamara and Bundy--high-level proposals in the spring of 1962 for aggressive military operations against Cuba, and urgent planning and preparations for such operations--invasion, airstrike or blockade--directed and monitored by the President and by McNamara, in the fall of 1962, just prior to the Missile Crisis.

In the absence of official disclosure in the intervening period, it would not be expected--by someone knowledgeable about the secrecy system--that McNamara or Bundy or the others would feel they had a right to reveal or discuss matters of this sort, even a quarter-century later.

But there are, in fact, reasons that go beyond formal job or clearance requirements that explain why these particular facts--and others that were never subject to these formal constraints but are concealed just as effectively just as long--benefit from such meticulous discretion.

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[The questions I am moving toward here include:

What are officials still concealing and lying about, with respect to the Cuban Missile Crisis? What categories of events, operations, information; what specifically?

Why are they still lying? Why the secrecy?

What information has most recently become available (specifically, since the Hawks' Key seminar in the spring of 1987, and then at and since the Harvard Conferences in the fall of 1987)? How does it affect the interpretations made earlier?

What data from my own notes of 1962-64 has still not been publicly revealed nor disclosed by the participants in these discussions? What seem to be the reasons for this continued secrecy? How do these data affect recent, and earlier, interpretations?

What has been the effect, at various periods starting in 1962, of public (and in some cases, American official) ignorance of specific data that was still, at the time, kept secret and/or lied about? How have the various "lessons learned" been shaped by this evolving history of the manipulation of information? What may have been effects on policy, foresight, resistance? On resulting risks of war, and other costs?

What can we conclude in more general terms from this history and analysis about the motives, practices and effects of official secrecy and lying? When and why should we expect to be kept ignorant, and to be lied to, in future, and with what sorts of consequences?

What should we conclude--from the secrets they have kept, the lies they have told, and above all from the more comprehensive, hidden history of their decision-making that is now knowable--about the character, the values, aims, priorities, loyalties, of our past national security officials? Likewise for officials of the Soviet Union, and of our respective allies.

What risks were they willing to run, for what incentives? What can be said of the actual risks we were facing, by their policies and choices? (There is both good and bad news, along this bottom line, in the new data; on balance, it will not be reassuring to the public or most elite analysts).

How can we lower these actual risks? What can be learned from this history that will help us do that? How might less, more, or different official secrecy and lying--and correspondingly, public understanding--bear on such risk? How might it bear on the nature and content, as well as the effectiveness, of public policy?

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27 yrs

(46 no RP...?)

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What were their actual, secret strategies and aims, expectations? What were their effective motives? What risks were they willing to run, for what incentives? What surprised them? What did they fail to foresee, or consider, or understand? What can be said of the actual risks we were facing, by their policies and choices? What

various lessons did they individually draw; how did these affect their subsequent policies (e.g. in Vietnam); how might these have been different with more information or if they had asked different questions of their experience?

What other evolutions of the crisis seem to have been, in some sense, highly possible? How close were we to these, what would have had to happen to bring them about? What difference would it have made? What can be said of the actual risks we were facing, given their actual (or quite possible) policies and choices?

(There is both good and bad news, along this bottom line, in the new data; on balance, it will not be reassuring to the public or most elite analysts).

How can we lower such risks in the future? What can be learned from this history that will help us do that? How might less, more, or different official secrecy and lying--and correspondingly, public understanding--bear on such risk? How might it bear on the process of determination and the nature and content, as well as the effectiveness, of public policy?

Tuesday, March 28

What McNamara is still silent or lying about:

Prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis; before October 14, 1962

of Leon:

1. Mongoose: the secret war against Cuba after Cuba I, the Bay of Pigs; its scale, and the high priority attached to it by JFK and in particular by RFK, who essentially headed it; its role as stimulus to the Soviet deployment. 1975
2. Actual U.S. intentions with respect to Cuba, after Cuba I: to overthrow the Castro regime. ~1987
3. High-level estimates in the spring of 1962 that U.S. invasion of Cuba would be necessary to accomplish US aims of replacing Castro; proposals and consideration of invasion (though no definite decision or commitment). (Updated contingency plans for invasion from the summer of 1961). 1989
4. Maneuvers in spring and summer of 1961 both preparing, rehearsing and threatening invasion of Cuba: undoubtedly intending and evidently succeeding in heightening apprehension of possible invasion among Cubans--and, it turns out, Soviets. 1987
Lopes?
5. Assassination schemes against Castro and other leaders (including his own recommendations for assassination in 1962). 1975
6. Provocation proposals, plans, preparations, as part of Mongoose planning, intended to provoke or to fake Cuban actions that would be used to justify direct US intervention. (Mongoose was understood by the Chief of Naval Operations and by Sam Wilson, later head of DIA and then on the covert actions staff of the SecDef, as primarily intended to provide such provocation and excuse). *Northwoods: 2000!*
7. Urgent planning for possible invasion, directed and monitored by the President and SecDef, in early October, 1962, under a number of possible contingencies or justifications (several of which could have been simulated or stimulated by Mongoose activities), with a deadline for maximum readiness of October 20. 1987
8. Concurrent maneuvers involving a simulated invasion against "Ortsac" (as announced in the press).

9. Actual deployment and operational status of IRBMs in Turkey in April 1962 (not earlier). (According to Khrushchev, plausibly, and to Burlatsky and others, this was a specific stimulus to Khrushchev's decision to move IRBMs to Cuba.)

More generally, none of the Kennedy officials acknowledges (though critics have made the point) that Khrushchev's move was probably partly stimulated by Kennedy's choices to build up strategic forces in 1961 and 1962 even after the missile gap was disproven in September 1961 (after which McNamara's persistent claim that the US buildup was simply a response to exaggerated estimates of Soviet forces is clearly false). men!
Ball

Nor do they acknowledge the impact of repeated threats of possible US first-use or first-strike made by McNamara and Kennedy in 1961-62 (RFK is also quoted in the WGBH series); or the impact of a decision to expose Soviet strategic nuclear inferiority publicly in Gilpatric's speech of October, 1961 (which I proposed and drafted). me

In other words, just as in their suppression to this date of information about US covert "pressure" on Cuba and plans for direct intervention, these officials fail to acknowledge any responsibility for provoking by US choices --some of them highly questionable, even apart from this possible consequence--in the strategic realm.

10. High-level staffwork on the possible motives and impact of Soviet deployment of MRBMs/IRBMs in Cuba in August and September 1962 (e.g., NSAM on August 23, Harry Rowen memorandum). 1964

11. Unprecedented secrecy--culminating in the PSAIM clearance--imposed on handling within the intelligence community of evidence relating to "offensive weapons" in Cuba, after Presidential assurances to the public and warnings to the Soviets in September. 1964

12. Actual availability of evidence--convincing to some analysts and officials, including Nitze (though not to most, and evidently not brought to the President's attention)--of the presence of Soviet missiles, some days prior to the October 14 U2 flight (forming the basis for its scheduling). 1964

13. The equivocality--and the actual wording--of "assurances" given by Soviets, such as Dobrynin, about the "defensive character" of Soviet military aid to Cuba, in contrast to later charges--as a 1964

major justification for US military action--of unequivocal Soviet deceit. (The one clearly-established case of of unequivocal deception, from Khrushchev and Mikoyan via Georgi Bolshakov, seems to have arrived at the White House after the missiles had been discovered and US military action had been decided upon).

shows credibility / reliability / usefulness / lack
of American & British & JFK officials.
10
Never
Ment

1990?

During the Missile Crisis: after October 14.

1964 + "incident"
= K not at
control of
Soviet

14. The actual initial reactions of various principals on learning of the presence of the missiles, prior to the first ExComm meeting on the morning of October 16. In particular, Paul Nitze's judgment in the evening of October 15 (having learned of the missiles several days earlier) that invasion and airstrike had to be ruled out as too bloody and risky--and that we would just "have to eat them," i.e., reluctantly accept their presence.

1964

Dean Rusk, discussing this with Nitze, concurred.

(Nitze, in his interview with Blight and Welch, mentions this discussion but omits to say what his opinion was of possible US responses, or his conclusion; nor are these revealed--indeed, for any of those informed before the meeting--in any other source.

Rather, there are frequent--false--assertions that no principal, unless possibly Stevenson, seriously entertained even momentarily the thought of making no military response to the Soviet deployment.)

McG

15. Likewise, McNamara's own response, Tuesday morning October 16, that it had been a mistake for the President to make the warning he did on September 13--he had so advised the President--and there would be no crisis if he had not.

1964

16. Suggestions by both Taylor--Chairman of the JCS--and McNamara in the ExComm meeting of October 17 (the first with the President not present) that the presence of the missiles might be accepted without any military response, since as McNamara put it, they made no significant difference in the strategic balance, and they constituted no military threat justifying response.

1962/64

These suggestions--quoted in my transcript of Nitze's unpublished notes of October 17 and never cited in any prior discussion--are in sharp contrast to the general assertions cited above, which have been accepted without question in all existing accounts. Thus, those who did not--contrary to all these accounts--take it for granted without hesitation that an active military

response was justified and called for, included the Secretaries of State and Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: along with the Assistant Secretary Paul Nitze, who along with Chairman Maxwell Taylor was later counted as a principal hawk. Judging by their positions thenceforth, the Deputy Secretaries in both State and Defense, George Ball and Roswell Gilpatric, almost surely were in this camp.

17. Repeated discussion by several participants (not only by Stevenson, uniquely "exposed" in this respect by Barlett and Alsop in December 1962), McNamara in particular, prior to the President's speech of October 22, of the acceptability and probable necessity of a trade of the missiles in Turkey (and possibly other concessions, perhaps including Guantanamo).

18. Indication by the President on October 20--as shown in Nitze's notes, but cited by others earlier--that he regarded such a trade as acceptable and even probable--not, as McNamara was still describing it publicly, on the WGBH account shown this year, as "inconceivable"--and that he differed with Stevenson only on the question of when to mention this negotiation option (not, the President decided, in the speech announcing the blockade, as Stevenson urged, but only after the blockade had been implemented).

It is actually consistent with this--though a very significant revelation, if confirmed--that in the Moscow meeting on the crisis this year, Dobrynin is reported to have asserted that RFK himself in some fashion had introduced the suggestion of the Turkish trade as a possibility, in meeting with Dobrynin on Tuesday night, October 23: at the least (reports are vague, and perhaps Dobrynin's account was, too) RFK said something that led Dobrynin to raise the possibility in his cable of the meeting to Moscow). (If this is true, McNamara, and others, might or might not be aware of it).

Holman

19. The possibility that as early as Friday, October 19 (if not earlier) some officials, including McNamara and perhaps the President, had decided fairly strongly against airstrike or invasion at all--given the possibility that some missiles were already operational and might be launched under attack without authorization.

If this were the case (a possibility never hinted at by any participants prior to 1987, and never made explicit or openly

discussed to this day) it would imply that the threats of escalation (beyond tightening of the blockade) implied by military preparations for airstrike and invasion before and after the October 22 speech, discussed repeatedly in the ExComm meetings, and explicitly leaked through various channels, were to a considerable extent or perhaps wholly bluffs, aimed at improving the terms of trade in an eventual bargain and at managing the damaging image of such negotiations domestically.

What is inferred here--based plausibly on new evidence, which is less than conclusive--is a possible secret JFK three-part strategy for getting the Soviet missiles out of Cuba without a hot war (though probably not without significant political cost at home, which the strategy sought to minimize): (1) blockade, possibly progressively expanded; (2) threats (bluffs) of airstrike or invasion, accompanied by large-scale and visible preparations and aggressive reconnaissance; (3) negotiations, in which the US at least removed its missiles in Turkey as part of a deal (preferably proposed by Turkey or NATO, or by the UN). ^{public}

JFK From this perspective, it would be negotiations, with real concessions by the US (and perhaps NATO!), that would actually get the Soviet missiles out. The prior blockade and threats would set the stage for these negotiations, impressing both the Soviets and the US domestic audience with the Administration's willingness to act boldly and aggressively, taking risks, in order both to get better terms from the Soviets (hopefully, making no concessions on Berlin or Guantanamo, or elsewhere, other than in Turkey) and to make the actual terms palatable at home and in NATO.

(No one, neither hawk nor dove, seems to have imagined as a real possibility what actually happened: that a policy of blockade and threats alone might lead to Soviet withdrawal of its missiles, without the need to proceed to a third phase either of escalation or, as hypothesized here, a public trade signifying diplomatic parity. If anything, this surprise was more complete on the US side than that of the Soviet deployment in the first place; nor was it convincingly explained in the following quarter-century, although the core of the explanation became apparent in my secret study in 1964. How it came about, and the implications of its being a surprise at the time and uncomprehended long afterwards, are major subjects of this study.)

This hypothesis offers a basis for a relatively low estimate of

the risk of war erupting from the confrontation, limiting this risk to the possibility that the process of threatening (bluffing) might have generated pressures, commitments or surprises that got out of the President's control and led to escalations beyond his original intent. But just how small was this residual risk, given what we know now? And how did the President and other advisors see it then?

If an eventual trade, of at least the Turkish missiles, was acceptable and necessary from the beginning, how big a risk of war, and of nuclear war, looked to the President worth taking to improve appearances and the actual bargain? Did the President see this risk realistically; did he take all steps to minimize it? Was he justified, from any of these perspectives?

20. The President's clear personal position throughout Saturday, October 27, that the public trade of the missiles, proposed that morning by Khrushchev, was a reasonable and acceptable basis for ending the confrontation. This fact--first disclosed in the November 1987 release of the transcript, and not commented on since by any of the participants--is still flatly, falsely contradicted by McNamara's statement on the WGBH show cited earlier, that Khrushchev's proposed public trade was "inconceivable...inconceivable." (McNamara may have taped this statement before the publication of the transcript, but he knew better, and he could surely have had this falsehood edited out any time prior to the broadcast).

Thus, it was not inevitable but rather by giving way to his advisors--who did not anticipate the successful outcome the next morning--that the President chose to prolong the crisis by another 24 hours: during which US recon planes were being shot at, with the constant possibility of loss of control over events.

21. Almost alone, McNamara deprecates the straightforward interpretations of RFK's messages to Dobrynin on the night of October 27 as constituting either an ultimatum, on the one hand, or a secret trade of missiles, on the other. He cannot believe that RFK went beyond the terms of the small-group discussion before he met with Dobrynin, which he says did not include either a deadline or a definite threat of airstrike or invasion; nor does he see the assurance that the missiles would be removed from Turkey as a trade, but only as a description of a unilateral US policy: ignoring that no prior decision had been made by the President, and that RFK's

assurance was conditional on the crisis having been settled satisfactorily.

The latter position by McNamara seems simply to be his continuation of the official cover story of 1962. The former skepticism may reflect his own position then of extreme reluctance to see such a threat carried out in 48 hours, or ever, and his belief the President felt the same way; this is consistent with the hypothesis mentioned in 19 above. Either the President or RFK might have decided, after the small-group discussion in which McNamara participated, to go beyond its terms in threatening; but consistent with McNamara's belief, the President--with or without RFK in agreement, or even knowing his mind--might have seen this explicit secret ultimatum as a bluff. *On this "bluff" --*

McNamara's positions raise the question what he thinks did bring Khrushchev's sudden concession on Sunday morning, without the public trade of the Turkish missiles and without any time pressure on the Soviets in the form of an ultimatum? *(a secret bluff: he wasn't sure of the Soviet's reaction to know) "no deal" is possible. (Beale) He didn't expect*

22. The absence from ExComm thinking on Saturday, Oct. 27, of the possibility that Khrushchev had not ordered the firing of the SAM that destroyed our U-2, nor authorized Castro's firing on US low-level recon planes: both confirmed by the Soviets in 1987 and 1989.

In general, while expressing concern about possible loss of control, McNamara never gives any specifics about how this might have happened (other than possible launching of a Soviet nuclear missile by a low-level officer without authorization, under attack).

It is not clear that he has yet realized how close such an escalation--undesired by him and the President--may have come, by the interaction of firing by Cubans and Soviets uncontrolled by the Kremlin and a specific ultimatum by RFK--relaying a commitment by the President and ExComm--on US response to a shootdown.

23. The urgency and the meaning (problematic) of efforts on the afternoon and evening of October 27 to "defuse" (or remove the warheads from) IRBMs in Turkey (to my dismay, at the time).